

T H E
P R O T E S T A N T
F A I T H

ABSOLUTE MORALITY

by
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In the Bible God has revealed to us His nature and His character. An important truth is that God is holy. He hates sin, "He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13) and He commands us to hate sin as well. "Be ye holy, for I am holy" is His word to us (Leviticus 11:44). We cannot pretend that we do not know what sin is, for it is clearly defined in the Bible, and our own consciences also tell us that certain acts and thoughts are wrong. We need to remember that all of us will give an account to our Creator as to how we have obeyed His law, whether written in His word, or written in our conscience. This judgment will be minute and exhaustive, for Jesus taught that even for every idle word we will give an account. God has absolute standards of purity, and He will judge us by these standards which He has made known to us through the Scripture and through conscience.

However, in present day society God's standards are given no consideration by exponents of conduct. Nowadays the morality of human actions is assessed without reference to God's mind or will. This amounts to a denial of the existence of God. For if we acknowledge He exists we dare not ignore His standards. But in place of the absolute standards of God's revealed will, modern society has substituted the relative standards of contemporary opinion. Two consequences follow. Moral standards instead of being steady, fluctuate, for there are no fixed standards of reference; for what society disapproves of in one decade it will tolerate in the next; and secondly, moral standards are step by step lowered, for it is so much easier and more congenial to break down than to build

up. It is only by regular reference to God's unchanging absolute standards that our own standards can be maintained.

The Scriptures set before us the ideal of purity in thought, "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8). It is true that lustful thoughts will arise from our sinful nature, but they ought not to be entertained, let alone expressed in word or picture. We need to recall God's absolute standards. He hates and forbids sin and has written this clearly both in Scripture and in our consciences. We dare not ignore these absolute standards. However, nowadays everything is judged not by God's absolute standards but by the relative standards of what our society is willing to tolerate. An example is the increasing toleration being given to obscenity and pornography, illustrated by the outcry against prohibition of obscene books. Yet we do not allow people to expose their bodies in public in an indecent way, so why should we allow authors or artists to expose their souls by depicting lustful characters drawn from their imagination.

The replacement of God's absolute standards for conduct by the relativism of contemporary opinion finds another example in the unthinking leniency shown to criminals. It is, of course, our duty to temper justice with mercy, but before we can do this, we must first establish a standard of justice, and it is here that our modern

standards are breaking down. Attention is focused on the plight of the criminal rather than on the victim, through a failure to remember God's attitude to the whole incident. The recent Benn murder case in Western Australia illustrates this. We would all agree that in this case justice should be tempered with mercy, but in some of the comments the question of justice, and of God's standards has been completely lost sight of. Thus the Chancellor of Dr. Benn's university was reported in the daily press as stating of Dr. Benn "We hope strongly he will be released before the expiration of his sentence. It would be rather dreadful for a man of his talents to be locked away for so long a period." This comment reflects no awareness of the dreadfulness of the action, the baby dead in its cot, shot by the one to whom it looked for protection, nor any awareness of God's judgment on the action. All the Chancellor speaks of is the criminal's talents being locked away in prison. If this is the way so eminent a citizen speaks, how widespread we may expect this moral relativism to be. Christians need to return consciously and vigorously to God's absolute standards.

Relativism in morals finds expression in the excuses offered for the part taken in co-operation with sin. We have had a good illustration of this last week. You will remember that a member of parliament described some paintings hung in the public Art Gallery of New South Wales as obscene. In my opinion, this description was correct. The real culprits were the painters who expressed their lustful and lascivious thoughts on canvas, but responsibility for their public exhibition also rested with the judges who passed these paintings

for hanging, and the officials of the gallery that permitted their exhibition. Yet in an interview reported in the press one of the judges excused himself by saying "We were only there to adjudicate on the draughtsmanship and ability. It isn't my problem how they paint them". Yet the judge was looking at a painting expressing sinful thoughts, and he ought not to have been unmoved in this way, let alone contribute to the wider exhibition of the paintings. For God hates the thoughts that were depicted on the canvas and we should hate them too, and not co-operate with their wider diffusion. A similar excuse was made by one of the directors of the Art Gallery who is reported to have said that the gallery merely made space available, as though it took no responsibility for what was hung there. This attitude is characteristic of us all. We as a community are responsible for what is sold on the bookstalls or printed in the press or hung in the Art Gallery even though other people may have a more direct responsibility. All of us are responsible for seeing that what is contrary to the declared mind of God finds no place among us. It was failure at this point in Hitler's Germany that allowed the atrocities of which we are still reading in the newspapers. By a strange coincidence in the same issue that reported these remarks of the judge and the gallery director about the art exhibition, there was a report of an excuse made by a doctor, when accused in a London court of sterilizing gypsies against their will and without anaesthetics, during the Nazi regime. The doctor said "The man did not come to the operating theatre because of my choice. I had to carry out what I was told". Nevertheless it was his knife that cut into the victim. We cannot excuse ourselves in this way, either for Nazi atrocities or for permitting

or co-operating in any other act which is against the mind of God. God's standards are absolute, and we know them in our heart, even though we do not read the Bible, and God will judge us by His standards and not by the relativism of contemporary opinion.

Unfortunately, although the Roman Catholic Church takes a stand against obscenity, a stand we welcome, it has a lenient doctrine of co-operation in sin which is the loophole which effectively lowers moral conduct in the community, by allowing this "passing the buck" in moral issues rather than demanding a stand for absolute purity. I may take an example of this lax Roman Catholic doctrine of co-operation in sin from volume 3 of Radio Replies, which are regularly broadcast over 2SM. Thus on page 306, the writer excuses a Roman Catholic lawyer when he co-operates actively in enabling a man to divorce his wife in order to be free to do what the lawyer judges to be adultery and so forbidden by God. The writer says "The lawyer cannot normally co-operate in such a plan", but he explains that if a refusal would mean a loss in his practice he may co-operate. The writer explains "I am not obliged to suffer serious injury rather than to permit him to do wrong". But, on the contrary, God's direction in the matter is clear. God commands: "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11). T. Slater S.J. in "A Manual of Moral Theology", Vol.1, p.205, teaches the same lax doctrine when he says that it is permissible to sell a gun to a criminal even though it is certain he intends to use it criminally, if the failure to sell that gun would mean the loss of monetary profit. But God's standards are absolute. If need be, we must be willing not only to lose our profit but even to lay down our lives for our brethren in the same way as Christ laid down His for us (I. John 3:16).

H. Davis S.J., in his four volume Moral and Pastoral Theology, vol.1, p.346, teaches similarly that Catholics may help in the manufacture of articles which have nothing but a sinful use, so long as other employment is not available to them. Similarly, on p.394 Davis argues that a servant may deliver a letter, knowing that it is an invitation to commit sin, if to refuse would mean the loss of his job.

However, against this sort of reasoning, it must be said that the Christian is to have no share in sinful actions. God hates sin and a Christian must not co-operate with it in any way. The Christian must obey God's laws and trust God to supply his needs, even though obedience means the loss of a job or perhaps even life itself. But if we honour God by taking a stand for absolute purity and uprightness in obedience to Him, He will not dishonour us, nor forsake us. We may trust Him to provide for our needs according to His promise. However, as is well known the Roman Catholic Church rejects the doctrine of justification by faith, and consequently it finds little place for faith and trust as a principle for daily living. But God requires absolute obedience to His moral laws, and on our part this requires complete trust and faith in God, that He will provide for us. With regard to our neighbour God calls for complete love, in the same way that Christ showed complete love towards us. No consideration, not even life itself, let alone money, is sufficient to excuse lack of faith and lack of love. Christians are the light of the world and the salt of the earth but if the light is dim and the salt has lost its saltiness, how is society to be saved?

Sometimes we are involuntarily associated with other people's sins, but the error of the Roman Catholic doctrine is that it allows considerations of personal convenience and profit to justify a willing co-operation, when the Christian reaction should be instantaneous aversion in the presence of sin, and a steadfast refusal to co-operate willingly in any aspects of it. Thus in the matter of art gallery paintings, we may, of course, declare our opinion that they are not obscene; but it is no excuse merely to say that we are concerned only with the artistry, and not the obscenity. It is the Christian duty of all of us to have nothing to do with sin; God commands us to be holy as He is holy. We co-operate with sin when we tolerate it in our presence. We must not allow our lethargy to involve us in co-operation with the sin of certain members of the community any more than we can excuse the lawyer or the tradesman co-operating for the sake of financial considerations. God's standards are absolute; He calls us to absolute purity, absolute honesty, absolute love and absolute trust, and we should remember that He will judge us according to these standards, and so searching will that judgment be that we will account, even for every idle word.

God takes His standards seriously, and it is this which makes our modern relativism so ill founded.